The Reptiles & Amphibians of Albania

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly Tirana/Corfu
Days 2 – 7	Explore the beautiful, varied, habitats of Albania
Day 8	Inbound flights

Departs
May – June

Focus
Reptiles & Amphibians

Grading
Important: please read the 'Tour Grading and Focus' section at the end of the document before booking.

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code ALB02)

Highlights
- Enjoy a standout area for reptile and amphibian abundance in all of Europe
- Search for the endangered meadow vipers, and the highly sought Nose-horned Viper and Leopard Snake
- Survey for the regions' amphibians including the near-endemic Albanian Pool Frog
- Explore pristine freshwater habitats for beautiful Balkan Terrapin
- The range of special lizards include such species as Dalmatian Algyroides, Balkan Green Lizard, Erhard's Wall Lizard, Glass Lizard and Snake-eyed Skink







Fire Salamander, Nose-horned Viper, Hermann's Tortoise

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Introduction

An exploration of the Republic of Albania is a tantalizing prospect for the naturalist and indeed especially for anyone with an interest in seeing Europe's reptile and amphibian species. Shackled for much of the latter half of the 20th century by isolationist and communist regimes, the beauty of Albania has been hidden away from tourists for much of its recent history.

Intact habitats and alluring Mediterranean climate provide paradise for reptile & amphibian life and in Albania they can be encountered with rare abundance for a European country, and a diversity of over 40 species. On an itinerary carefully prepared by herpetologists and biologists of the University of Tirana, we shall go in search of such special species as Greek Meadow Viper (*Vipera graeca*), Meadow Viper (*Vipera ursinii*) and Albanian Pool Frog (*Pelophylax shqipericus*) – three endangered species – alongside a plethora of other species which includes two species of European tortoise, two species of terrapin, Fire Salamander and an impressive range of frog, lizard, and snake species.

Whilst searching for our targets, we can be sure to see exciting Balkan wildlife from other groups. Birds could include Short-toed Eagle, Dalmatian Pelican and an exciting Balkan contingent of woodpeckers, shrikes and chats. Though we'd need some luck to see them, mammals inhabiting some of the locations visited includes Brown Bear, Chamois and Grey Wolf. Butterflies thrive in Albania's unspoiled habitats and we can find species such as Yellow-banded Skipper, Chequered Blue, Camberwell Beauty and Twin-spot Fritillary, and flora including the endemic Albanian Lily and a whole range of orchids.

Complimenting fantastic wildlife prospects is mouth-watering Mediterranean cuisine made from the olives, citrus, figs and other Mediterranean ingredients that grow in the country's delightful climate. Our searches for Albania's wildlife can be fueled by copious amounts of coffee for those who enjoy it – indeed coffee is an integral part of the Albanian lifestyle, and the country has more coffee houses per capita than any other country in the world! At the end of a day spent in beautiful habitat we can also enjoy sampling the fruits of Albania's long history in wine production.

On this exciting 8-day holiday we will travel through wonderful landscapes, staying at comfortable 3* and 4* hotels throughout, and explore a variety of species-rich habitats in search of the wildlife of this little-known, picturesque, Balkan country.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1 Fly to Tirana – Shkoder

After arriving in Albania's capital, Tirana, we'll make the short drive to the beautiful Shkodra Lake (Lake Scutari). Depending on flight schedules we may instead arrive at the Greek island of Corfu, which is just a short ferry journey from Albania.

Shkodra Lake is recognized as the largest Balkan lake and is a biodiversity hotspot, the second richest site in the whole of Albania for herpetofauna. Here we'll find such species as Eastern Montpelier Snake (*Malpolon insignitus*), Caspian Whip Snake (*Dolichophis caspius*), Common Wall Lizard (*Podarcis muralis*) and Dalmatian Wall Lizard (*Podarcis melisellensis*).

The area surrounding the lake is renowned for its vibrant and highly-contrasting morphs of Nose-horned Viper (*Vipera ammodytes ammodytes*) and we'll enjoy an exciting search for this wonderful species here.

The area is also one of the most important in Albania for avifauna. Over 200 bird species are recorded here and this site represents the only location in Albania where colonies of Whiskered Terns are found. Golden Jackal and European Otter commonly occur here.

Tonight we'll stay in a lovely hotel with commanding views, and a population of Kotschy's Gecko (*Mediodactylus kotschyi*)!



Shkodra Lake

Day 2 Shkoder – Peshkopi

After breakfast, we will spend the first part of the day around Shkodra Lake and its surroundings including the impressive Rozafa Castle, which is not only interesting for its history, but is a great place to find reptiles including Balkan Green Lizard (*Lacerta trilineata*), European Glass Lizard (*Pseudopus apodus*), Worm Snake (*Xerotyphlops vermicularis*), Dalmatian Algyroides (*Algyroides nigropunctatus*), and Hermann's Tortoise (*Testudo hermanni*). Other interesting wildlife here includes Spotted Fritillary, Mediterranean Slant-faced Grasshopper, Southern Migrant Hawker, Red-bellied Jumping Spider, Schmidt's Marbled Bush-Cricket, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Pygmy Cormorant and many others. In the afternoon will travel to our next destination, Peshkopi.

For the next two nights we'll stay in a modern hotel, where all rooms have air-conditioning and free Wi-Fi.

Day 3 Korab Mountain

After breakfast we'll set off to the nearby Korab Mountain where we'll spend the day.

Korab Mountain is known to be one of the very few sites in Albania where the rare Meadow Viper (*Vipera ursinii macrops*) can be found and we'll search carefully for this species here. At Korab we can also find Green Toad (*Bufotes viridis*), Yellow-bellied Toad (*Bombina variegata*), Dalmatian Algyroides (*Algyroides nigropunctatus*), Eastern Green Lizard (*Lacerta viridis*), Erhard's Wall Lizard (*Podarcis erhardii*), Aesculapian Snake (*Zamenis longissimus*) and Adder (*Vipera berus bosniensis*). Korab offers great opportunities also for interesting endemic and sub-endemic species plant species such as: *Lilium albanicum*, *Cerastium grandiflorum*, *Malcolmia illyrica*, *Thlaspi mycrophyllum*, *Oxytropis prenja*, *Viola kosaninii*, *Phyteuma pseudorbiculare*.



Adder (*Vipera berus bosniensis*)

Day 4 Lake Ohrid

After breakfast we will move to our next destination, where on the journey we will stop to enjoy lunch at the beautiful city of Ohrid on the UNESCO-listed Lake Ohrid. Then we take a beautiful journey by the lake shore and then up through the National Park Galicica in North Macedonia. Here we can stop for several species including Spur-thighed Tortoise, Sand Lizard (*Lacerta agilis bosnica*), European Snake-eyed Skink (*Ablepharus kitaibelii*), and Green Toad (*Bufotes viridis*).

In the afternoon we'll take an enjoyable boat trip to Maligrad (Snake) Island. Maligrad is a small island (5 ha), on Lake Prespa. With few predators reaching its shores, and pristine waters surrounding the island, Grass (*Natrix natrix*) and Dice Snake (*Natrix tessellata*) thrive here and can be found in remarkably high densities. There are also thriving populations of Erhard's Wall Lizard (*Podarcis erhardii*) and Alpine Swifts. Other interesting wildlife includes Dalmatian and White Pelicans and Pygmy Cormorant.

From Lake Prespa it is just 30 minutes to the beautiful city of Korca where we will overnight.

Day 5 Berat

After breakfast we move to our final destination, Berat, where we will be based for the next three nights. Berat is a beautiful city, much-loved for its white Ottoman houses. On the way we will make several stops including a search for the beautiful Fire Salamander (*Salamandra salamandra*).

Day 6 – 7 Tomorri Mountain

For the next two days we'll spend the day in the area of Tomorri Mountain which is situated in the southern centre of Albania. Aside from being a beautiful area, our time here will enable us to search for one of Europe's rarest snakes, the endangered Greek Meadow Viper (*Vipera graeca*). This species occurs in the mountain's subalpine meadows and is estimated to have an occupancy area of around 252 km^2 across its entire range. The diet of this species consists mainly of Orthoptera, which will be abundant at the time of our visit. It will be a real privilege to observe this rare species, one of Europe's rarest vertebrates, and any sightings will be recorded and submitted to contribute to monitoring data studying the population status of this species.



Greek Meadow Viper (*Vipera graeca*)

Here we will find a good number of birds such as Golden Eagle, Rock Partridge, Common Rock Thrush, Northern Wheatear, and many others. At lower elevation we can find a different subspecies of Nose-horned Viper (*Vipera ammodytes montandoni*) which typically have a bright green tail-tip. European Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea*), Four-lined Snake (*Elaphe quatuorlineata*), and Macedonian Crested Newt (*Triturus macedonicus*) are some of the other species we hope to find.

Day 8 Inbound flights

After breakfast we'll head to the airport for our inbound flights, having had a wonderful exploration of Albania.

Tour Grading & Focus

On a typical day on our herpetology tours we'll begin searching in the field after breakfast, when the sun has warmed the substrates and landscapes, often getting into the vehicles at 9am and, after stopping for approximately one hour for lunch (which is often a continental-style picnic eaten in-situ), we'll continue into early-evening when we will stop for a rest and dinner. Most evenings it will be possible to do excursions in search of nocturnal species, which will on average be for three hours after dinner. With an equal percentage of the target reptile and amphibian species likely to be nocturnal, these night searches are an important part of the tour but are optional, with some participants preferring to rest on some of the days. On average, 5-8miles are walked per day.

We'll focus our time in the field on building an enviable list of reptile and amphibian species seen. Whilst searching, there is no doubt we'll come across a huge variety of amazing fauna and flora, of which we'll also take time to enjoy, but reptiles and amphibians will strongly remain our focus. Sensitively checking under stones, logs and other refugia is an effective way of finding many species. Some of the target reptile or amphibian species may require longer field hours to locate and therefore this tour is suitable, and most enjoyable, for experienced herpetologists or naturalists who, aside from wishing to see the region's rarely-seen reptiles and amphibians, relish being in the field searching for and identifying the vast array of birds, butterflies, invertebrates, orchids and other wildlife which can be found sharing the wonderful habitats that we'll explore on the tour. Snakes do, of course, occur at low densities and are notoriously elusive, so it's unlikely that every species mentioned will be encountered. However, with the guidance of a leading herpetologist, your chances improve dramatically. A realistic goal might be to observe around 6-10 species – sometimes more, sometimes fewer – depending on conditions.

In summary, Naturetrek herpetology holidays offer tremendous value and are suitable for those whose main holiday focus is seeing some of the world's superb reptiles and amphibians, whilst spending the majority of their time in wildlife habitats.

On this holiday some occasional mountain ascents are required.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

Whilst we should hope for warm, sunny conditions, it can be overcast at times with occasional rains. It would be sensible to come prepared for such possibilities. Binoculars are not essential but would be useful.

What's Included

All meals and accommodation are included in the cost of this holiday, except for any meals required during travel, starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8.

Extending Your Holiday

We would be happy to assist in arranging extensions, should this be of interest. Please contact Dan Lay (Dan@naturetrek.co.uk or 01962 733051) for further information and/or make sure to stipulate any interest in a possible extension upon booking.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements at the time of booking.

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Lake Shkodra © R. Hills, May 2023